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Have you ever wondered how humans determine right from wrong? The question of how best to lead a moral life, and how the word "morality" can be best defined, is one of the foundational questions of philosophy. Moral philosophy (or ethics) has, over the years, dictated numerous theories designed to help people make the best moral decisions. These theories often come into conflict with each other, however, and a firm grasp of their basic differences is essential for those who want to study moral theories such as human rights and ethics. Similar to ethical theories, moral theories use moral reasoning to determine actions and consequences of those actions in different settings. Other examples not included in this article are consequentialist theories, deontological theories, intuitions, metaethics, applied ethics, normative ethics, virtue theory, theory of justice and practical reason for human beings and their actions. Many of these moral theories include teleological and moral obligation, moral norms, moral duties, right action, character traits, moral principles, moral rules, decision making and courses of action to determine the best consequences. Utilitarianism: A Theory of Consequences Utilitarianism, first popularized by British philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in the 19th century, is a theory that holds that the best way to make a moral decision is to look at the potential consequences of each available choice; then, one should pick the option that either does the most to increase happiness or does the least to increase suffering. Utilitarianism, also known as consequentialism, is often summed up as a philosophy of "The greatest good for the greatest number." This theory is different from rule utilitarianism and act utilitarianism. Deontology: A Duty-Based Moral Philosophy Deontology is a duty-based moral theory. Deontologists state that society needs rules in order to function and a person can only be called moral to the extent that he abides by those rules. The most famous and eloquent exponent of deontology is generally agreed to be Immanuel Kant. Kant coined the following maxim, known as the Categorical Imperative, to help people decide which actions should be governed by rules: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can also will that it would become a universal law." In other words, people should only do things that they would be happy to see everyone do. For example, people shouldn't lie because if everyone lied all the time then society would collapse. Relativism: A Theory Based on Experiences Moral relativism is a theory which states that no one person's morals are better or worse than any other. Relativists argue that a person's moral code is shaped by the society in which he is raised as well as their culture, and it states that no society is inherently better or worse than any other. Relativism is a moral philosophy that could, therefore, be different depending on where you grow up, and what may be right in your society, could be very wrong in another person's society. Divine Command Theory: A Higher Power Divine command theory states that God is the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes morality, and that without God we have no clear way of telling right from wrong. Divine command theorists, therefore, believe that the best way to live a moral life is to act in accordance with Scripture. It does not matter what's considered good or bad, but simply what God commands. Those who believe in this theory generally look to the Bible, a religious leader or someone they have considered to be a prophet in order to make their judgments. This is one of the most controversial moral theories. Virtue Ethics: Always Improve Yourself Virtue ethics states that only good people can make good moral decisions. Therefore, the best way to be moral is to constantly seek to improve oneself. Virtue ethicists list a number of qualities that they believe are universal, and that all cultures appreciate. They include wisdom, prudence, loyalty, honesty, temperance, bravery, magnanimity, and justice. Virtue ethicists argue that if a person tries his best to embody these traits, then by definition he will always be in a good position to make moral judgments. A virtuous person has a different point of view about actions and consequences, looking at their human life. Egoism: A Theory Based on Self-Interest Egoism is a moral philosophy that holds that the best way for one to be morally good is to act in accordance with one's self-interest. Egoists hold that we are only really qualified to consider our own well-being, and that attempts to "Be one's brother's keeper" are doomed to fail because we can never really know what our peers actually want. Egoists also believe that if everyone acts in their own self-interest, then society is more likely to solve moral dilemmas to the satisfaction of all parties, thereby maximizing overall happiness. Natural Rights Theory: Human Rights Natural rights theorists, or human rights theorists, believe that every person is endowed with certain inalienable rights, such as the right to life, the right to own property, and the right to liberty. Natural rights theorists argue that these rights are self-evident, and would exist even if nobody believed in them. The reason that natural rights theorists hold these rights as self-evident is that they are essential to the flourishing of human happiness and the foundation of civil society. For example, they argue that without the right to own property, there is no incentive to create property and therefore society cannot advance. Based on this theory, human rights are vital to the future of society. Get Revising Created on: 12-05-17 18:13 Some religious believers believe that morality is rewarded after death and immoral behavior is punished. Morality helps people to survive and is part of God's design for human development. Morality is a command that must be obeyed and comes from an authority that is God Some people believe that our conscience tells us what we ought to do/not to do. Moral rules are set by society/ religion/ family. Acting moral may not necessarily mean that you will be rewarded. Theists believe in Morality as it is rewarded by an afterlife. © Copyright Get Revising 2025 all rights reserved. Get Revising is one of the trading names of Tutorist Limited. Register Number: 15241839 (England and Wales), VAT No. 454 2876 70 Registered office: The Old Casino, 28 Fourth Avenue, Hove. BN3 2PJ Though relativism is a simple theory that respects other cultures, it can lead to everyone's views being seen as equal, creating a problem when assessing the morality behind events like the Holocaust. Philosopher Hans Jonas in his book The Imperative of Responsibility notes that the perennial fate of ethics is that the negative is so much clearer than the positive. By this he means that it is relatively easy to identify bad behavior and dispositions we disapprove of. Morality is more concerned with criticism than construction. The more difficult task of ethics, though, is once having condemned the morally repugnant knowing what to put in its place. Recent studies in neuropsychology underscore the point that we more quickly respond to the negative than the positive. Here are some examples: Our brains process pictures of angry faces quicker than happy faces. Experiments also show that we easily see an angry face in a crowd of happy faces, but a happy face doesn't stand out in a crowd of angry faces. Anger is threatening to us and we react to threats quickly. We better, even if make mistakes once in awhile since the reverse—not reacting to a threat when there really is one —can be deadly. We react quickly even when the threat is more symbolic than real. You read the words 'war' and 'crime' and it turns out that you processed these words quicker than if you had read the words 'peace' and 'love.' War and crime can kill us and that's not good; peace and love are good for us but we can live without them. We don't need to think about bad things—run away fast. But we do need to puzzle out how to create and sustain peace and love—that's hard work. Morality tends to highlight the negative—the threats to our well-being that need to be addressed—leading to moral codes that get loaded with a list of negatives. Don'ts outnumber Dos. This insight helps to explain, I think, the reason why it is easier to mobilize against something than it is to organize to create something new. Occupy(ing) Wall Street was easier than reforming Wall Street. Railing against Congress is easier than reforming Congress. Certainly oppression and injustice need protesting against. But this only makes the constructive task more urgent. What kind of world do we really want and can we be the people to make such a world? We don't have to work at knowing what frightens us but it is very hard work to reconstruct the ethical ideal. We need to balance both sides of the ethical equation: we need to change what is morally repugnant and at the same time we need to honor the human spirit. For this reason, on any given day we may picket and protest, dance and sing, condemn and praise. Our dual responsibility is to undo what present harm is being perpetrated and to hold before us a vision of what better there may be. This we do by acknowledging the human condition both in frailties and nobility. Get the help you need from a therapist near you—a FREE service from Psychology Today. Atlanta, GA Austin, TX Baltimore, MD Boston, MA Brooklyn, NY Charlotte, NC Chicago, IL Columbus, OH Dallas, TX Denver, CO Detroit, MI Houston, TX Indianapolis, IN Jacksonville, FL Las Vegas, NV Los Angeles, CA Louisville, KY Memphis, TN Miami, FL Milwaukee, WI Minneapolis, MN Nashville, TN New York, NY Oakland, CA Omaha, NE Philadelphia, PA Phoenix, AZ Pittsburgh, PA Portland, OR Raleigh, NC Sacramento, CA Saint Louis, MO San Antonio, TX San Diego, CA San Francisco, CA San Jose, CA Seattle, WA Tucson, AZ Washington, DC More from Arthur Dobrin D.S.W. More from Psychology Today No, moral development and behavioral development are not the same. Moral development refers to the understanding and formation of one's moral values and principles, while behavioral development involves the overall growth and changes in an individual's actions and reactions over time. While there may be some overlap between the two, they are distinct concepts. Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. 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